

Luke 15 — Prodigal Son, et al.

Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 276–278.

In reference to the prodigal son, I said it was a subject I had never dwelt upon; that it was understood by many to be one of the intricate subjects of the scriptures; and **even the Elders of this Church have preached largely upon it, without having any rule of interpretation.** What is the rule of interpretation? Just **no interpretation at all.** Understand it precisely as it reads. I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, **what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable?** It is not national; it does not refer to Abraham, Israel or the Gentiles, in a national capacity, as some suppose. To ascertain its meaning, we must dig up the root and ascertain what it was that drew the saying out of Jesus.

While Jesus was teaching the people, all the publicans and sinners drew near to hear Him; “and the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying: This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” This is the keyword which unlocks the parable of the prodigal son. **It was given to answer the murmurings and questions of the Sadducees and Pharisees, who were querying, finding fault,** and saying, “How is it that this man as great as He pretends to be, eats with publicans and sinners?” Jesus was not put to it so, but He could have found something to illustrate His subject, if He had designed it for nation or nations; but He did not. It was for men in an individual capacity; and all straining on this point is a bubble. “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.”

And he spake this parable unto them — “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them doth not leave the ninety-and-nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety-and-nine just persons which need no repentance.” **The hundred sheep represent one hundred Sadducees and Pharisees,** as though Jesus had said, “If you Sadducees and Pharisees are in the sheepfold, I have no mission for you; I am sent to look up sheep that are lost; and when I have found them, I will back them up and make joy in heaven.” This represents hunting after a few individuals, or one poor publican, which the

Pharisees and Sadducees despised.

He also gave them the parable of the woman and her ten pieces of silver, and how she lost one, and searching diligently, found it again, which gave more joy among the friends and neighbors than the nine which were not lost; like I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God **over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety-and-nine [so-called] just persons that are so righteous; they will be damned anyhow; you cannot save them.** (Jan. 29, 1843.) *DHC* 5:260-262.

Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 307–311

The one who delights in all of the worldly luxuries of today, at the expense of spirituality, is living but for the moment. His day is now. He will be barred from the rewards of the higher life he rejected.

In the impressive parable of the Prodigal Son the Lord taught us a remarkable lesson. This squanderer lived but for today. He spent his life in riotous living. He disregarded the commandments of God. His inheritance was expendable, and he spent it. **He was never to enjoy it again, as it was irretrievably gone. No quantity of tears or regrets or remorse could bring it back.** Even though his father forgave him and dined him and clothed him and kissed him, he could not give back to the profligate son that which had been dissipated. But the other brother, who had been faithful, loyal, righteous and constant, retained his inheritance, and the father reassured him: “All that I have is thine.”

This parable of the Prodigal Son repays our closer analysis. It is contained in Luke 15:11-32.

... A certain man had two sons:

And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be

in want.

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into the fields to feed swine.

And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

Thus resolved, the son made his way homeward, and his father, seeing him coming home, went Out to meet him, welcomed him back with a kiss, an embrace, and genuine compassion and forgiveness.

The son admitted his prodigality: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." He did not ask for servant status as he had thought to do, perhaps because with such a warm welcome he may have had hopes of total reinstatement; for the happy father spread over him the best robe, put a ring on his hand and shoes On his feet, and killed the fatted calf to celebrate the great occasion as he expressed his joy in these words: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again: he was lost, and is found."

The elder son, On returning from his work in the field, was angered at the display of lavish festivities for the brother who had wasted his all with harlots, and he complained to his father, who entreated him to join the party:

... Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.

To this the father might have said something like this: "Son, this is your estate — all of it. Everything is yours. Your brother has squandered his part. You have everything. He has nothing but employment and Our forgiveness and Our love. We can well afford to receive him graciously. We will not give him, your estate nor can we give him back all that he has foolishly squandered." He did say: "For this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. . . ." And he said also: "Son, thou art ever with me and all that I have is thine."

Is there not significance in that statement of the father? Does not that signify **eternal life**?

When I was a child in Sunday School my teacher impressed upon me the contemptibility of the older son in his anger and complaining, while she immortalized the adulterous prodigal who was presumed to have expressed repentance. But let no reader compare grumbling and peevishness with the degrading sins of immorality and consorting with harlots in riotous living. John mentioned, "There is a sin unto death," and the younger son's transgressions might approach that terrifying condition if he did not repent and turn from his evil course. Elder Talmage comments as follows upon the sins of the two brothers:

We are not justified in extolling the virtue of repentance on the part of the prodigal above the faithful, plodding service of his brother, who had remained at home, true to the duties required of him. The devoted son was the heir; the father did not disparage his worth, nor deny his desserts. His displeasure over the rejoicing incident to the return of his wayward brother was an exhibition of illiberality and narrowness; but of the two brothers the elder was the more faithful, whatever his minor defects may have been....

... Not a word appears in condonation or excuse for the prodigal's sin upon that the Father could not look with the least degree of allowance; but over that sinner's repentance and contrition of soul, God and the household of heaven rejoiced.

... There is no justification for the inference that a repentant sinner is to be given precedence over a righteous soul who has resisted sin; were such the way of God, then Christ, the one sinless Man, would be surpassed in the Father's esteem by regenerate offenders. Unqualifiedly offensive as is sin, the sinner is yet precious in the Father's eyes, because of the possibility of his repentance and return to righteousness. The loss of a soul is a very real and a very great loss to God. He is pained and grieved thereby, for it is his will that not one should perish. [Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 460–461.]

This superb parable contains many lessons which relate to the material in this book. It teaches the importance of remaining pure and undefiled and retaining virtue and righteousness; and it teaches the heavy penalties of transgression. It emphasizes the principle of repentance as a means of forgiveness

and recovery of self. It teaches the ugliness of pride, jealousy, peevishness, lack of understanding, and anger; and it stresses the glorious and ultimate blessings which are available to the worthy, even though they may exhibit some minor weaknesses.

The prodigal son certainly had every opportunity to enjoy permanently a full and valuable estate with resultant comforts, joys, harmony and peace. He had security. All was available to him until he left the path and dissipated his fortune, hating his birthright. He had demanded from his father, "... the portion of goods that falleth to me." He took it "all" into a far country, and there, pressed by the demands of a carnal world, wasted his substance with riotous living. He spent "all" of his estate and was relegated to penury and hunger.

He admitted rather than confessed his broken covenants. And what a difference between admission and confession! He acknowledged his unworthiness but said not a word about changing from unrighteousness to purity through a reformed life. **"Coming to himself" seems to be more a realization of his physical plight, his hunger pangs and his unemployment, than a true repentance.** Is there here any reference to new goals, a transformed life, escalating ideals and attitudes? He talked about bread of the oven rather than the "bread of life" the water of the well rather than the "Living Water." He said nothing about filling a crown with jewels of righteous accomplishments, but made much of filling a stomach which was shriveled by near starvation.

The older son's being ever with his father is significant. If this parable is a reminder of life's journey, we remember that for the faithful who live the commandments there is a great promise of seeing the Lord and being with him always in exaltation. On the other hand, the younger son could hope for no more than salvation as a servant, since he "despised his birthright," and dissipated "all" of his inheritance, leaving nothing to develop and accumulate toward eternal heirship again. He had sold it for a mess of pottage as did Esau, another prodigal.

He had sold something he **could not recover.** He had exchanged the priceless inheritance of great lasting value for a temporary satisfaction of physical desire, the future for the present, eternity for time, spiritual blessings for physical meat. Though he was sorry for his rash trade, it was now so late, "everlastingly too late." **Apparently neither his efforts nor his tears could retrieve his lost blessings. Thus God will forgive the repentant sinner who sins against divine law, but that forgiveness can never restore the losses he sustained during the period of his sinning.**

But many wrongs can be repaired if repentance is sincere. President Joseph F. Smith amplified this thought as follows:

When we commit sin, it is necessary that we repent of it and make restitution as far as lies in our power. When we cannot make restitution for the wrong we have done, then we must apply for the grace and mercy of God to cleanse us from that iniquity.

Men cannot forgive their own sins they cannot cleanse themselves from the consequences of their sins. Men can stop sinning and can do right in the future, and so far their acts are acceptable before the Lord and worthy of consideration. But who shall repair the wrongs they have done to themselves and to others, which it seems impossible for them to repair themselves? By the atonement of Jesus Christ the sins of the repentant shall be washed away; though they be crimson they shall be made white as wool. This is the promise given to you. We who have not paid our tithing in the past, and are therefore under obligations to the Lord, which we are not in position to discharge, the Lord requires that no longer at our hands, but will forgive us for the past if we will observe this law honestly in the future. That is generous and kind, and I feel grateful for it. [Conference Report, October 1899, 42.]

When one realizes the vastness, the richness, the glory of that "all" which the Lord promises to bestow upon his faithful, it is worth all it costs in patience, faith, sacrifice, sweat and tears. The blessings of eternity contemplated in this "all" bring men immortality and everlasting life, eternal growth, divine leadership, eternal increase, perfection, and with it all, godhood.

Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, April 1952, 24.

The Lord gave us the impressive parable of the prodigal son. This squanderer lived but for today. He spent his life in riotous living. He disregarded the commandments of God. His inheritance was expendable, and he spent it. **He was never to enjoy it again as it was irretrievably gone. No quantity of tears or regrets or remorse could bring it back.** Even though his father forgave him and dined him and clothed him and kissed him, he could not give back to the profligate son that which had been dissipated. But the other brother who had been faithful, loyal, righteous, constant, retained his

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The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, 109

The faithful son is more blessed than the prodigal. In the impressive parable of the prodigal son the Lord taught us a remarkable lesson. This squanderer lived but for today. He spent his life in riotous living. He disregarded the commandments of God. His inheritance was expendable, and he spent it. He was never to enjoy it again, as it was irretrievably gone. No quantity of tears or regrets or remorse could bring it back. Even though his father forgave him and dined him and clothed him and kissed him, he could not give back to the profligate son that which had been dissipated. But the other brother, who had been faithful, loyal, righteous and constant, retained his inheritance, and the father reassured him: “All that I have is thine.” [*Faith Precedes the Miracle, 224.*]

When I was a child in Sunday School my teacher impressed upon me the contemptibility of the older son in his anger and complaining, while she immortalized the adulterous prodigal who was presumed to have expressed repentance. But let no reader compare grumbling and peevishness with the degrading sins of immorality and consorting with harlots in riotous living. (*MF 307, 309*)

The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, xx–xxi.

Though not considering himself a theologian, he has come to some conclusions which differ at least in emphasis from interpretations frequently taught in the Church. For example, in explaining the parable of the Prodigal Son he has stressed the superiority of the faithful son over the prodigal, while detracting nothing from the desirability of the prodigal’s return nor the father’s happiness at seeing the lost one found.

Again, he has concluded that when Christ said on the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” he was **referring to the soldiers and not to the people and leaders** who had cried, “His blood be on us, and on our children.” The latter could not be

forgiven when they were not repentant. (See *MF 167, 280.*) Christ in his charity had no personal wish for vindictiveness, but for the sinner to avoid the consequences of his act without repentance would go against the order of heaven. The immutable law is that men cannot be saved in their sins. Similarly he concluded that when Christ dealt with the woman taken in adultery he did not forgive her, but admonished her to go her way and repent so that she could be forgiven. (See *MF 165.*) And the thief on the cross received not forgiveness, but a promise of opportunity to hear the gospel and repent fully in the world of spirits. (See *MF 166.*) If the thief, who had acknowledged Christ, was not forgiven immediately, why should it be thought that those who had not acknowledged him but had wrought his death and denied his divinity would receive forgiveness without repentance?

At the other end of the spectrum he undertook to qualify Joseph Smith’s assertion that an adulterer cannot enter the celestial kingdom, pointing out that if taken without qualification the statement would be inconsistent with the scriptures and the general tenor of the gospel. An adulterer, despite his grievous sin, can obtain forgiveness if truly repentant. (See *MF 347-352.*)

He has made a somewhat different point in an impassioned defense of Peter, whom he calls “my brother.” In light of Peter’s show of bravery in the Garden when Christ was taken and his boldness after the Crucifixion, President Kimball expressed doubt that Peter’s denial of Christ was an act of cowardice. He suggested several other explanations, but concluded that in any event Peter’s years of powerful ministry would eclipse any moment of weakness. (See 71-12.)

Ehat & Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, Joseph Smith Diary, by W. Richards: 29 January 1843 (Sunday), 161–162

Prodigal Son.—when you have heard go & read your bible if the thing are not wright true.—

great deal of speculation. Subject I never dwelt upon — understood by many to be one of the intricate subjects — Elders in this church preach. — no rule of interpretation. — what is the rule of interpretation? Just no interpretation at all. understood precisely as it read. — I have [a] Key by which I understand the scripture — I enquire what was the question which drew out the answer. —

National. Abraham. &c as some suppose 1st place

dig up the root — what drew out the saying out of Jesus? Pharisees & scribes murmured! this man receives sinners & eateth with them this is the key word. — to answer the murmuring & questioning of [that] Saducees & Pharisees had is it this man as great as he pretends to be. & eat with publicans & sinners. — Jesus not put to it so but he could have found something of the kind discerned it for nations. — Men in an individual capacity. all straining on this point is a bubble. — Boy Boys say ought to be hanged can tell it to you.

big folks Presbyterians. Methodists. Baptists &c — despise the ignorance & abomination of this world. —

this man receiveth sinners — he spoke this parable. what man of you having an hundred sheep & 100 saducees & Pharisees If you pharisees & saducees. are in the sheepfold. I have no mission for you sent to look up sheep that are lost will back him up — & make joy in heaven. — hunting after a few individuals laying it on his Shoulder — one publican you despise. — one piece of Silver — the piece which was lost — Joy in found of the angels over one sinner that repenteth so righteous they will be damned any how you cannot save them rain off from a geese's back — Great I. little you —

certain man had two sons &c. — am a poor publican a sinner — humbled themselves. spending their bread & living &c Ill return to my fathers house. to Jesus you pharisees so righteous you cannot be touched. — I will arise &c claim not be a pharisee or saducee. I claim not to be a son do not let me starve — nothing about Ephraim Abraham — is not mentioned. all that is meant is brought to bear [p.162] upon the pharisee. saducee. the publicans & sinners, Eldest son, pharisees & saducees murmuring & complaining — because Jesus sat with publicans & sinners — father came out & entreated when John came baptized all. when Jesus come they were angry & would not go in. dealing of God with individuals men always Righteous always have access to throne of God eats in his fathers home If we interpret this to national, view where is the eldest son?

likened the kingdom to an old womans milk pan — how could Jesus take the kingdom from those who bore no fruit & give it to another. — is an apple tree no longer a tree because it has no apples? parable of Prodigal son spoken to illustrate this distinction — from the moment John's voice was first heard he was the Prunner on the earth entitled to salvation. on the earth.

Servants of God of the last days myself & those I have ordained, have the priesthood & a mission — to the publicans & sinners — & if the Presbyterians & [two

lines left blank].

are in the kingdom. if they are not righteous — what is the result. they are sinners & if they reject our voice they shall be damnded.

If a man was going to hell I would not let any man disturb him. — while we will be the last to oppress we will be the last to be driven from our post — peace be still bury the hatchet & the sword. — the sound of war is dreadfull in my ear. any man who will not fight for his wife & children is a coward & a bastard.

Mohemetans, Presbyterians, &c if ye will not embrace our religion embrace our hospitalities.

Times and Seasons, Vol.4, 309 [John Taylor?]

As the Bible is to decide the question now under investigation, it will be well to adopt some scriptural rule of interpreting it. St. Luke, X:25, 26; 'And behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? -- how READEST thou?' It seems from this, that **the Savior designed that the scriptures should be understood literally, and that they mean what they say and say what they mean.** 2d Pet., I:20, 21: 'Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation, for the prophecy came not in olden time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost.'; As these rules are very good for understanding scripture, we will make use of them upon the present occasion, and see where they will leave the sects of the day. The **sectarian spiritualizing machine** has done such an extensive business, and made so many wonderful and frightful developments to the world of late years, that we have sometimes wondered whether it was not propelled by the powerful incentive of steam, or aide by that incomprehensible magic which achieved the unwithering laurels of the eccentric Sinbad. At all events they seem to partake of the nature of this remarkable genius, for as he 'scored to meddle' with any but the most 'resplendent gems,' while perambulating the 'valley of diamonds,' so do **the sectarian clergy scorn to meddle with any scripture but just such passages as they can run through this mighty engine, and warp into the proper shape to suit their private predilections.** But we will not be more severe than the real nature of things will admit. Truth however, must be brought to light.